

# The Role of Historical Knowledge in Perception of Race-Based Conspiracies

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**Abstract** We test the hypothesis that knowledge of historically documented, anti-black conspiracies affects perceived plausibility of new, anti-black conspiracies. In Experiment 1 ( $N = 78$ ), African Americans and European Americans read about a current conspiracy aimed at undermining either African American or European American-elected officials. African Americans perceived the anti-black conspiracy as more plausible and the conspiracy informant as more credible than did European Americans. The difference in perception of informant credibility was mediated by recognition of historically documented, anti-black conspiracies. In Experiment 2, we manipulated European Americans' ( $N = 105$ ) exposure to information about historically documented, anti-black conspiracies. European Americans who learned about actual, past anti-black conspiracies perceived new anti-black conspiracies as more plausible than did European Americans who learned about race-silent conspiracies or who did not learn about conspiracies. To the extent that European Americans lack awareness of incidents of racism in US history, they are likely to underestimate the possibility that racism impacts contemporary events.

**Keywords** Social identity · Conspiracies · History · Perception of racism

## Introduction

### The Role of Historical Knowledge in Perception of Race-Based Conspiracies

European Americans tend to perceive a variety of anti-black, racist conspiracies to be less plausible than do African Americans (Bird and Bogart 2005; Crocker et al. 1999; Goertzel 1994; Herek and Capitanio 1994; Klonoff and Landrine 1999). More generally, European Americans tend to perceive less racism in everyday events than do people from diverse, historically oppressed groups (Adams et al. 2006b; Johnson et al. 2003; Rodin et al. 1990). In the present research, we consider whether such racial differences in social perception are a function of group differences in historical knowledge that people use to make judgments about the pervasiveness of racism in the present. More specifically, we consider whether group differences in the perceived plausibility of contemporary anti-black conspiracies are mediated by European Americans' relative lack of knowledge about actual past anti-black conspiracies in the US.

### Explanations for Group Differences in Perceptions of Racism

Group differences in beliefs about the plausibility of racist conspiracies are a specific instance of more general group differences in the perception of racism. Research on perceived racism has primarily focused on the motivational forces that might lead people associated with stigmatized groups to perceive relatively high levels of racism in ambiguous events. For example, one perspective suggests that people associated with a stigmatized group might be motivated to perceive racism as a means of buffering their

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self-esteem from the negative implications of the group's low status (Crocker and Major 1989; Major et al. 2002). From this perspective, attributing the group's poorer outcomes to dominant-group racism can have self-protective benefits for the stigmatized, to the extent that it allows them to discount the role of the personal self as the cause of their negative outcomes.

Evidence relevant to this self-protection hypothesis comes from a survey of African American and European American students' beliefs about anti-black conspiracies perpetrated by the US Government (Crocker et al. 1999). Consistent with research on group differences in perceptions of racism, African Americans perceived anti-black conspiracies to be more plausible than did European Americans. Moreover, belief in conspiracies among African Americans was positively related to both a measure of personal self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965) and a measure of racial self-esteem, the private collective self-esteem scale (CSE; Luthanen and Crocker 1992). The investigators interpreted these results as evidence that African Americans may be motivated to believe conspiracy theories in order to protect their self-esteem.

#### *European Americans as the Focus of Explanation*

The first contribution of the present analysis is to shift the focus of explanation for group differences in perception of racism. Although prevailing accounts have emphasized stigmatized-group tendencies to perceive high levels of racism, we emphasize that these differences also reflect dominant-group tendencies to perceive lower levels of racism. In other words, it is equally plausible that group differences in perceived plausibility of anti-black conspiracies lies with European American tendencies to deny the extent of anti-black racism rather than African American tendencies to “exaggerate” the extent of anti-black racism (see Schmitt and Branscombe 2002; Adams et al. 2006a). Consistent with this analysis, an examination of the mean scores for the measure of conspiracy beliefs in the study by Crocker et al. (1999)—where African Americans were near the midpoint of the 7-point scale (“might possibly be true”) and European Americans were at the low endpoint of this scale (“almost certainly not true”)—suggests that the interesting pattern that requires explanation is the relatively extreme, European American tendency of denial rather than the less extreme, African American admission of possibility (or skepticism about impossibility). Moreover, besides the *positive* relationship between endorsement of conspiracy beliefs and self-esteem among African Americans, Crocker et al. (1999) also reported an equally strong, *negative* relationship between conspiracy beliefs and both personal self-esteem and racial self-esteem among European Americans. If one interprets the former

relationships among African Americans as evidence of motivation to perceive racism, then one can interpret the latter relationships as equally compelling evidence for a European American motivation to *deny* racism. (e.g., to deny responsibility for racist harm, avoid feelings of collective guilt, or defend legitimacy of the intergroup status quo; see Adams et al. 2006b; Branscombe and Miron 2004; Miron et al. *in press*; O'Brien et al. 2009; Powell et al. 2005).

#### *Informational Sources of Group Differences*

Without denying the relevance of divergent motivational forces, the second contribution of the present analysis is to consider informational source of group differences in perception of racism. Even when people try to set aside identity-protective motivations to perceive events in an “objective” manner, differences in beliefs about the plausibility of current anti-black conspiracies might still occur because African Americans and European Americans draw upon different bases of knowledge when making judgments about race-relevant events. These different knowledge bases suggest different conclusions about the prevalence of racism in US society.

How do differences in community-specific knowledge emerge? One source is differential personal experience. As members of an oppressed group, African Americans are more likely than European Americans to experience acts of racism either directly or vicariously through social networks (Branscombe et al. 1999). In contrast, European Americans have fewer occasions to witness racist oppression. As a result, they may infer a lower base rate for the extent of racism in American society (Sigelman and Welch 1991) and perceive anti-black conspiracies as less plausible than their African American counterparts.

Another source of differential knowledge is socialization about racism. African American parents explicitly educate their children about the prevalence of racism in ways that European American parents do not (Caughy et al. 2002; Stevenson and Renard 1993). More generally, African American discourse and media grant more extensive consideration to issues of racism than mainstream American outlets (Turner 1993). To the extent that European Americans derive their knowledge about the world from mainstream media, they will lack exposure to information about the ongoing significance of racism in the lives of African Americans (Feagin and Sikes 1994).

The present research focuses on differences in familiarity with racism in US history as another important factor that may underlie differences in perception of racist conspiracies. Rather than strive for an accurate reconstruction of events, history education is frequently a patriotic endeavour that offers a flattering representation of

America's past (Baumeister and Hastings 1997; Loewen 1996). Textbooks in mainstream American schools present students with "storied" history that often omits wrongdoings committed by the US Government against underprivileged groups. To the extent that European Americans' knowledge is grounded in mainstream representations of the past, they may infer a small role of racism in US history, which then predisposes them to regard anti-black conspiracies as highly implausible.

In contrast, African Americans may have additional sources of historical knowledge besides mainstream representations—for example exposure to Afrocentric curricula (Asante 1998)—that imply a greater role of racism in current events. Because of these sources of knowledge, African Americans may be more aware than European Americans of historically documented incidents of racism. As a result of their greater knowledge of past anti-black conspiracies, African Americans may be less likely to deny the plausibility of present anti-black conspiracies. Consistent with this argument, research has documented a positive relationship between education and perception of anti-black conspiracies among African Americans. That is, among more educated African Americans, perceptions of conspiracy plausibility are greater than among less educated African Americans (Klonoff and Landrine 1999).

### Overview of the Present Research

We argue that differences in beliefs about anti-black conspiracies in the present arise, in part, because African Americans and European Americans have differential knowledge of the historical prevalence of racism. African Americans may indicate greater plausibility of current anti-black conspiracies in part because they know more about documented acts of racism in US history than are European Americans. Likewise, European Americans may deny the plausibility of anti-black conspiracies because they are relatively ignorant of racist events in US history.

We investigate this idea in two experiments. In Experiment 1, we assess whether group differences in knowledge about historically documented anti-black conspiracies perpetrated by the US Government mediate group differences in perceived plausibility of a new anti-black conspiracy. In Experiment 2, we investigate whether experimental manipulation of historical knowledge about past anti-black conspiracies is sufficient to influence European Americans' judgments about the plausibility of new anti-black conspiracies.

### Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we consider how racial group differences in knowledge about historically documented racist

conspiracies affect perceived plausibility of a new racist conspiracy. The design of the study included two between-subject factors: participant race (African American or European American) and a manipulation of conspiracy type (anti-black or anti-white). We expected to replicate previous research with African Americans perceiving conspiracies to be more plausible than European Americans only in the historically common case of a European American group conspiring against African American politicians (i.e., the anti-black condition), but not the historically uncommon case of an African American group conspiring against European Americans (i.e., the anti-white condition). In addition, we hypothesized that knowledge about historically documented, anti-black conspiracies would mediate the group differences in beliefs about a new conspiracy in the historically resonant, anti-black condition but would be unrelated to beliefs about a new conspiracy in the historically anomalous, anti-white condition.

### Method

#### *Participants*

Participants were 36 African American and 42 European American students in their first year at a Midwestern university. Participants received course credit in exchange for participation.

#### *Procedure*

A same-race experimenter administered the materials in the form of a short questionnaire booklet in the context of small, same-race groups. Participants completed the materials in the order that they appear below. Upon completion, the experimenter briefly interviewed participants about their experience in the study, asked them to read a short debriefing sheet that informed them of the purpose of the study, provided an opportunity for them to ask questions about the study, and thanked them for their participation. No participants expressed concerns or suspicion about the true purpose of the study.

**Conspiracy Manipulation** The first page of the booklet was ostensibly a newspaper article describing a present-day plot by an underground group aimed at undermining politicians. In the *Anti-Black* condition, participants read about a group of white Americans called "White Vigor" who plotted to defame and undermine the power of black politicians. In the article, an unnamed informant and former member of "White Vigor" confessed to using illegal phone taps, placing hidden surveillance cameras in hotel rooms and accessing and altering bank files as means of incriminating black politicians. Participants in the *Anti-White*

condition read the identical article, except that the group conducting the plot was called “Black Vigor” and it described black Americans who were conspiring to undermine white politicians.

**Dependent Measures** Participants responded to 11 items on a scale from 1 (*almost certainly not true*) to 7 (*definitely true*) to indicate beliefs about the conspiracy described in the newspaper article. A principal components analysis with promax rotation indicated that two factors accounted for 60.4% of the variance of the items. We constructed two indices based on the items that loaded highest on each factor. The *informant credibility* measure consisted of four items ( $\alpha = .79$ ) for which the participants indicated their opinion about the credibility of the informant who exposed the separatist group (e.g., “I believe the informant is telling the truth about the existence of a White [Black] conspiracy against Blacks [Whites]” and “this informant is likely to be exaggerating the extent to which Whites [Blacks] have conspired against Blacks [Whites]”). The *conspiracy plausibility* measure consisted of 7 items ( $\alpha = .88$ ) for which participants indicated their opinion about the plausibility of events like those described in the article (e.g., “I found this newspaper story to be quite plausible” and “I believe the problem of Whites [Blacks] conspiring against Blacks [Whites] is as widespread as the informant indicated”). We reverse coded individual items where appropriate so that high scores indicate greater informant credibility or conspiracy plausibility. The correlation between these subscales was  $r(86) = .59, p < .001$ .

**Historical Knowledge** Participants also responded to three items ( $\alpha = .78$ )—“In Tuskegee, Alabama the US Government exposed over 600 African American men to syphilis, and for the next 40 years denied them medical treatment for this potentially fatal disease;” “J. Edgar Hoover, as F.B.I. chief, illegally tapped the telephones of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” and “the F.B.I. has employed illegal techniques (e.g., hidden microphones in motels) in an attempt to discredit African American political leaders”—that measured knowledge of well documented, government conspiracies against black Americans. Participants used a 7-point scale (1 = *Certainly False* and 7 = *Certainly True*) to indicate how certain they were that those events did or did not occur.

## Results and Discussion

To evaluate our hypotheses, we first conducted  $2 \times 2$  analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on each dependent measure with participant race and conspiracy type as between-subjects factors. To the extent that group differences in beliefs about conspiracy are rooted in differential

knowledge about relevant historical cases, we anticipated a Participant Race  $\times$  Conspiracy Type interaction. More specifically, we hypothesized that beliefs about conspiracies should be greater in the historically resonant, anti-black condition—with African American participants indicating greater plausibility or credibility than European American participants—compared to the anti-white condition (which, given the power dynamics in US history, participants of both races should perceive as relatively implausible). We then followed the ANOVAs with regression analyses using only participants in the anti-black condition to test our hypothesis that group differences in knowledge about past anti-black conspiracies mediate observed differences in beliefs about a new, anti-black conspiracy.

## Analyses of Variance

The  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA for informant credibility revealed a main effect of conspiracy type,  $F(1,72) = 11.00, p = .001, \eta^2 = .13$ . Reflecting existing differences in social power and the corresponding ability to do conspiratorial harm, participants perceived greater informant credibility in the anti-black condition ( $M = 4.67, SD = 1.18$ ) than the anti-white condition ( $M = 3.86, SD = 1.21$ ). The main effect of race was not significant,  $F(1,72) = 1.32, p = .254, \eta^2 = .018$ . Consistent with our hypothesis, the Participant Race  $\times$  Conspiracy Type interaction was significant,  $F(1,72) = 4.27, p < .05, \eta^2 = .06$  (see Table 1 for means). A planned contrast within the anti-black condition indicated that African American participants perceived the “White Vigor” informant to be more credible than did European American participants,  $t(72) = -2.25, p < .05$ . Perceived credibility in the anti-white condition was no different for African Americans ( $M = 3.74; SD = 1.19$ ) than for European Americans ( $M = 3.99, SD = 1.26$ ),  $t(72) = .65, p = .50$ . Assessing the effect of conspiracy type within each racial group, African Americans perceived the informant as more credible in the anti-black condition than in the anti-white condition,  $t(72) = -3.66, p < .001$ . In contrast, European Americans did *not* perceive the informant to be any more credible in the anti-black condition than the anti-white condition,  $t(72) = -.92, p = .35$ .

The  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA for the measure of conspiracy plausibility revealed main effects of conspiracy type,  $F(1,74) = 40.77, p < .001, \eta^2 = .36$ , and participant race,  $F(1,74) = 10.26, p < .01, \eta^2 = .12$ . Participants perceived greater conspiracy plausibility in the anti-black condition ( $M = 5.13, SD = 1.26$ ) than in the anti-white condition ( $M = 3.57, SD = 1.24$ ). Regardless of conspiracy type, African American participants perceived greater plausibility of such conspiracies ( $M = 4.71, SD = 1.61$ ) than did

**Table 1** Racial influences on perception of political conspiracies

	African American participants		European American participants	
	Anti-black conspiracy ( <i>n</i> = 16)	Anti-white conspiracy ( <i>n</i> = 20)	Anti-black conspiracy ( <i>n</i> = 23)	Anti-white conspiracy ( <i>n</i> = 19)
Historical knowledge	5.72 (.93)	5.54 (1.35)	4.71 (1.05)	4.71 (1.45)
Informant credibility	5.20 (1.20)	3.74 (1.19)	4.33 (1.06)	3.99 (1.26)
Conspiracy plausibility	5.96 (.78)	3.71 (1.40)	4.55 (1.22)	3.42 (1.06)

Note: Cell entries refer to mean scores (and standard deviations) for each condition

European American participants ( $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ). Consistent with our hypothesis, the Participant Race  $\times$  Conspiracy Type interaction was significant,  $F(1,74) = 4.48$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$  (see Table 1 for means). A planned contrast revealed that African American participants perceived the anti-black conspiracy to be more plausible than did European American participants,  $t(74) = -3.73$ ,  $p < .001$ . There was no significant difference between African American participants and European American participants in the anti-white condition,  $t(74) = .65$ ,  $p = .44$ . The effect of conspiracy type was significant within each racial group. For this measure, both African American participants,  $t(74) = -5.79$ ,  $p < .001$ , and European American participants,  $t(74) = -3.15$ ,  $p < .01$ , perceived such conspiracies to be more plausible in the anti-black condition than in the anti-white condition.

The  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA for the knowledge index revealed the anticipated main effect of participant race,  $F(1,74) = 10.96$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .13$ . African American participants expressed greater certainty ( $M = 5.63$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) than did European American participants ( $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) that these historical events happened. Neither the main effect of condition nor the Race  $\times$  Condition interaction approached conventional levels of statistical significance,  $F_s(1,74) < 1$ .

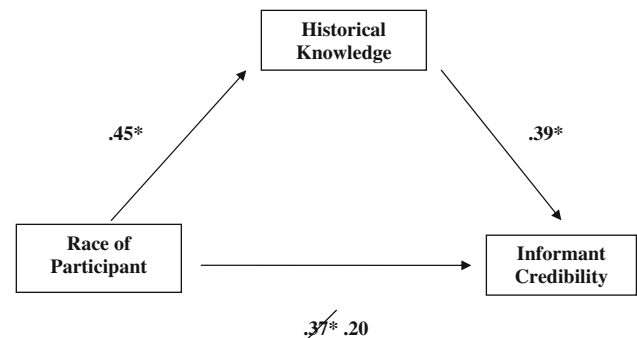
### Mediation Analyses

Results of ANOVAs provided support for hypotheses, such that group differences in perception of conspiracies against politicians emerged only in the historically resonant, anti-black condition, and not the historically anomalous, anti-white condition. To test whether knowledge of historically documented, anti-black conspiracies might account for observed differences in perceptions of anti-black conspiracies, we conducted mediation analyses following Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedure.

For the outcome of informant credibility, analyses confirmed reliable relationships between race and knowledge of history ( $\beta = .45$ ,  $p = .01$ ), between knowledge of history and informant credibility ( $\beta = .47$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and

between race and informant credibility ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $p < .05$ ). With race and knowledge of history as simultaneous predictors of informant credibility, the relationship between race and perceived credibility was no longer significant ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p > .20$ ), but the relationship between knowledge of history and perceived credibility remained significant ( $\beta = .39$ ,  $p < .05$ ). A Goodman (1960; see Preacher and Leonardelli 2001) test indicated that this mediated effect of race on informant credibility differed significantly from zero,  $z = 1.96$ ,  $p = .05$  (see Fig. 1). This pattern is consistent with the hypothesis that differential knowledge about historically documented, anti-black conspiracies can account for the race differences in perceived informant credibility concerning a new anti-black conspiracy plot.

For the outcome of conspiracy plausibility, analyses confirmed reliable relationships existed between race and knowledge of history,  $\beta = .45$ ,  $p = .004$ ; between knowledge of history and plausibility,  $\beta = .38$ ,  $p = .019$ ; and between race and plausibility,  $\beta = .56$ ,  $p < .001$  (Baron and Kenny 1986). With race and knowledge of history as simultaneous predictors of plausibility, the relationship between race and general conspiracy plausibility remained significant,  $\beta = .49$ ,  $p = .003$ , but the relationship between knowledge and perceived plausibility was not,  $\beta = .15$ ,  $p = .32$ . Thus, unlike the measure of informant credibility, race differences in knowledge about past anti-black



**Fig. 1** Test of the hypothesis that group differences in perceived informant credibility in the case of the anti-black conspiracy is mediated by knowledge of anti-black conspiracies that have been perpetrated in the past by the US Government. Note: \*  $p < .05$



conspiracies did not account for the differences observed on this measure of conspiracy plausibility. Whether this pattern reflects something essentially different about the two constructs or something about the measures we created is a topic for future research.

### Summary

Experiment 1 extended prior research by considering an information source of group differences in perception of racist conspiracies: specifically, knowledge of historically documented racist conspiracies perpetrated by the US Government. Awareness of well-documented, racist conspiracies was greater among African Americans than European Americans, and this difference in awareness of past anti-black conspiracies accounted for the difference in ratings of informant credibility in reporting a new anti-black conspiracy.

One limitation of Experiment 1 is that the measure of historical knowledge did not include alleged incidents of racism for which there is no historical documentation. As a result, it is impossible to know whether high scores on this measure reflect *accurate* historical knowledge, or merely the tendency to perceive racism in any event—past or present—regardless of truth status. Accordingly, the results of the present research are not definitive evidence that African American participants had more accurate historical knowledge than did European American participants, or even that the observed relationship between awareness of past racist conspiracies and perceptions of informant credibility necessarily reflects more accurate historical knowledge.

In a parallel program of research, we have used a signal detection paradigm to control for the tendency to claim incidents of racism for which there is no historical documentation (Adams and Nelson 2008; see also Salter 2008). Results of this research have indicated that African American participants were better than European American participants at identifying historically documented incidents of racism—but were no more likely to endorse undocumented, made-up incidents of past racism (i.e., “false alarms”)—and this difference in historical accuracy partially accounted for group differences in perception of racism in present US society.

Experiment 2 considers a different response to this limitation of Experiment 1. Rather than attempt better measurement of historical knowledge, we attempt to manipulate historical knowledge and investigate its effects on perceptions of conspiracy plausibility. Results of Experiment 1 imply that European Americans might perceive new anti-black conspiracies as more plausible if one made them more aware of historically documented racist

conspiracies. Experiment 2 provides a test of this possibility.

### Experiment 2

Experiment 2 extends Experiment 1 in two important ways. First, whereas in Experiment 1 we measured the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and pre-existing differences in historical knowledge, in Experiment 2 we manipulated historical knowledge. That is, we varied participants’ exposure to information about past racist conspiracies and examined its effects on perception of possible new conspiracies. Second, in Experiment 1, we assessed participants’ perceptions of a single case of a fictional conspiracy that we created. In Experiment 2, we adopted the measure of belief in anti-black conspiracies used in previous research (Crocker et al. 1999). This measure consists of 13 statements about alleged conspiracies that find frequent expression in African American communities. Although these conspiracies are not “fictional” (i.e., we did not create them for purposes of this research), their truth status remains unresolved: that is, investigations have neither confirmed nor conclusively disconfirmed them.

### Method

#### Participants

Participants were ( $N = 114$ ) undergraduate students at a Midwestern American university. We report data only for the ( $n = 105$ ) students (46 men, 59 women) whose self-reports indicated white American identity. Participants received credit in their introductory psychology course in exchange for their participation.

#### Procedure

We assigned participants at random to one of three history information conditions: race-relevant, race-silent, or control. In the two experimental conditions, a white experimenter gave groups of participants a short passage that described US Government conspiracies. In the *control* condition, participants received no historical article. After reading their assigned article, participants completed the following measures in the order indicated. Upon completion, the experimenter briefly interviewed participants about their experience in the study, asked them to read a short debriefing sheet that informed them of the purpose of the study, provided an opportunity for them to ask questions about the study, and thanked them for their participation. No participants expressed concerns or suspicion about the true purpose of the study.

**History Manipulation** Participants in the *race-relevant* condition read a passage describing two cases of conspiracies committed against African Americans. The first passage concerned the Tuskegee syphilis study. Participants read that the US Public Health Service deceived 623 African Americans about their positive syphilis status and systematically denied them treatment. The second concerned the FBI's illegal intimidation of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other African Americans under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover. Participants in the *race-silent* condition, participants also read a passage describing two cases of conspiracies, neither of which directed against African Americans. The first concerned the Watergate scandal. Participants read about the political spying and sabotage for Nixon's re-election effort. The second concerned the Iran-Contra affair. Participants read about secret US Government operations in which officials in the Reagan administration conspired to violate US law.

**Belief in Conspiracies** Participants completed the 13-item measure of conspiracy belief used in previous research (Crocker et al. 1999), with two modifications. In previous research, each item began with the phrase, "Some people say..." (e.g., "Some people say that the virus that causes AIDS was deliberately created in a laboratory to infect Black people"), and participants indicated their agreement on a scale that ranged from 1 (*Almost Certainly Not True*) to 7 (*Definitely True*). In order to increase the extent to which responses captured personal endorsement (rather than, for example, perception of rumour), we dropped the "Some people say..." stem and changed the endpoints of the response scale to 1 *Strongly Disagree* and 7 *Strongly Agree*.

A principal components analysis with promax rotation revealed four factors that accounted for 72.36% of the variance. We constructed four indices by calculating the mean of items that loaded highest on each factor. A first, *economic disempowerment* factor consisted of four items ( $\alpha = .84$ ) that described racist conspiracies designed to limit black economic power (e.g., "The high rate of school dropouts among Black people is the result of deliberate attempts to keep Black people from being educated and getting good jobs" and "The high rate of homelessness among Black people is deliberately encouraged by the government to keep Black people powerless"). A second, *criminalization* factor consisted of four items ( $\alpha = .80$ ) that described racist conspiracies involving government surveillance and discipline of black communities (e.g., "The government deliberately singles out and investigates Black elected officials to discredit them in a way it doesn't do with White officials" and "Black men are more likely to be put in jail than White men because the government wants to harm Black men"). A third, *population restriction*

factor consisted of three items ( $\alpha = .76$ ) that described racist conspiracies directed at minimizing black population growth (e.g., "The government deliberately prevents Black people from immigrating into this country to keep the number of Black people small") or destroying black families (e.g., "The government takes Black children away from their families to be raised by others in a deliberate attempt to harm Black families"). A fourth, *AIDS as weapon* factor consisted of two items ( $\alpha = .47$ ): "The virus that causes AIDS was deliberately created in a laboratory to infect Black people" and "Doctors are deliberately infecting Black babies with AIDS to kill Black people". We tested for hypothesized effects of the historical knowledge manipulation on both the overall composite measure ( $\alpha = .89$ ) and each of the four subscales.

**Private Collective Self-Esteem** Previous work suggests a negative relationship between white identification and racism perception (e.g., Schmitt and Branscombe 2002). To assess and control for this relationship, thereby permitting greater precision in our test of the effects of our manipulation of historical knowledge, we included a measure of white identity concern. Participants in all conditions completed the 4-item *private collective self-esteem subscale* of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSE<sub>pr</sub>; Luthanen and Crocker 1992;  $\alpha = .77$ ). Participants indicated their level of agreement with the four items (e.g., "In general, I am glad to be a member of my racial group") on a 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 7 (*Strongly Disagree*) scale where higher numbers indicate greater pride in their white identity. We reverse coded items as necessary so that higher numbers indicate more positive feelings about group identification.

**Manipulation Check** Finally, participants used a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree*) to indicate their agreement with the same three statements used to measure historical knowledge in Experiment 1, which also affirmed the specific conspiracies against black Americans presented in the race-relevant condition. We coded responses so that high numbers indicate greater agreement that these events did occur. This scale ( $\alpha = .62$ ) provided a means of assessing the effectiveness of the history manipulation.

## Results and Discussion

The primary hypothesis was that exposure to information about historically documented, anti-black conspiracies would lead white participants in the race-relevant condition to judge new, anti-black conspiracies as more plausible than did participants in the race-silent and control conditions. To test this hypothesis, we conducted an analysis of

covariance (ANCOVA) with the covariate  $CSE_{pr}$  a treatment condition as a predictor of the outcome measures. Our specific interest was the planned contrast testing the difference between participants in the race-relevant conspiracy condition against the participants in the race-silent and control conditions (corresponding to contrast codes of 1,  $-1/2$ , and  $-1/2$ , respectively). However, we also included the orthogonal, planned contrast testing the difference between participants in the latter two conditions (corresponding to respective contrast codes of 0, 1, and  $-1$ ).

### Manipulation Check

The ANCOVA both confirmed that the  $CSE_{pr}$  covariate negatively predicted historical knowledge,  $F(1, 101) = 6.76$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ , and revealed the anticipated effect of the history manipulation,  $F(2, 101) = 17.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .26$ . The focused contrast was significant,  $t(101) = 5.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .50$ , indicating that participants in the race-relevant condition reported greater recognition of historically documented racist conspiracies ( $M = 5.67$ ,  $SD = .83$ ) than did participants in the other two conditions, who did not differ in response to this item,  $t(101) = -.32$ ,  $p = .75$  ( $M_s = 4.35$  and  $4.41$ ,  $SD_s = 1.17$  and  $1.25$ , in the race-silent and control conditions, respectively). This pattern indicates that the procedure successfully increased awareness of historically documented, anti-black conspiracies among participants in the race-relevant condition, who all scored higher than the midpoint of the scale.

### Conspiracy Belief

The ANCOVA confirmed that the  $CSE_{pr}$  covariate negatively predicted scores on the composite measure of conspiracy beliefs,  $F(1, 101) = 17.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .15$ . The ANCOVA likewise revealed a marginally significant effect of the history manipulation,  $F(2, 101) = 2.82$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $\eta^2 = .053$ . The primary contrast  $t(101) = 1.97$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $r = .19$ , confirmed the hypothesized effect of the history manipulation, such that participants in the race-relevant condition scored higher on the conspiracy beliefs measure ( $M_{adj} = 1.99$ ,  $SD = .77$ ) than did participants in the race-silent ( $M_{adj} = 1.61$ ,  $SD = .62$ ) and control ( $M_{adj} = 1.81$ ,  $SD = .71$ ) conditions. The second contrast indicated that the means for the latter two conditions did not differ,  $t(101) = -1.33$ ,  $p = .19$ ,  $r = .13$ .

The ANCOVAs for components of the conspiracy beliefs measure revealed that the  $CSE_{pr}$  covariate negatively predicted scores on all components,  $3.61 < F_s(1, 101) < 17.34$ ,  $p_s < .06$ ,  $\eta^2_s > .03$ . However, the omnibus effect of the historical knowledge manipulation

was significant only for the criminalization factor,  $F(2, 101) = 5.82$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ . Omnibus effects for the other components did not approach statistical significance,  $F_s(2, 101) < 1.11$ ,  $p_s > .33$ ,  $\eta^2 < .025$  (see Table 2 for adjusted means). Similarly, planned contrasts revealed significant differences only for the criminalization component. The primary and secondary planned contrasts for the other components did not approach statistical significance,  $t_s(102) < 1$ . The primary contrast for the criminalization factor provided strong support for the hypothesis,  $t(101) = 2.76$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .26$ , indicating that participants in the race-relevant condition scored higher on this component of conspiracy beliefs ( $M_{adj} = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) than did participants in the other two conditions ( $M_s = 1.92$  and  $2.39$ ,  $SD_s = .88$  and  $1.12$ , in the race-silent and control conditions, respectively).

The second contrast for the criminalization component was also significant,  $t(101) = -2.02$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $r = .20$ . However, instead of the belief-enhancing effect of information about explicitly racist conspiracies, participants in the race-silent condition expressed *less* belief of criminalization conspiracies than did participants in the control condition (see Table 2 for means). This pattern tentatively suggests that failure to mention race-relevant examples when discussing past government conspiracies may sometimes lead white Americans to express even greater doubt about the plausibility of present racist conspiracies. A speculative explanation for this pattern may be a sort of contrast effect, whereby exposure to well-known race-silent conspiracies (i.e., Watergate and Iran-Contra) led participants to find the target conspiracies less plausible by comparison. However, the post hoc nature of this analysis suggests caution in interpretation, and a conclusive test awaits future research.

### Summary

Overall, European American participants expressed disagreement with potential anti-black conspiracies; however, exposure to information about historically documented anti-black conspiracies led participants in the race-relevant condition to express less extreme disagreement than did participants in other conditions. Follow-up analyses indicated that this effect of the manipulation was not evident across all components of the conspiracy beliefs scale, but instead was concentrated in items regarding government surveillance and discipline of black communities (i.e., the criminalization factor).

One speculative explanation for this concentration of the effect is that the items in the criminalization component included three of the first four items on the 13-item conspiracy beliefs scale. The effect of the manipulation may have dissipated as participants in all conditions read similar



**Table 2** The effect of the historical knowledge manipulation on conspiracy beliefs

Conspiracy beliefs component	Relationship with CSE <sub>pr</sub> ( $n = 105$ ) <sup>a</sup>	Condition means (and standard deviations)		
		No conspiracy control ( $n = 37$ )	Race-silent conspiracy ( $n = 36$ )	Race-relevant conspiracy ( $n = 32$ )
Historical knowledge (manipulation check)	-.16*	4.41 (1.25)	4.35 (1.17)	5.67 (.83)
Economic disempowerment	-.30**	1.60 (.83)	1.44 (.71)	1.58 (.75)
Criminalization	-.27**	2.39 (1.12)	1.92 (.88)	2.74 (1.10)
Population restriction	-.37**	1.76 (.83)	1.65 (.92)	1.95 (.97)
AIDS as weapon	-.18*	1.16 (.44)	1.25 (.62)	1.33 (.59)
Conspiracy belief total	-.36**	1.81 (.71)	1.61 (.62)	1.99 (.77)

\*  $p < .05$  (one-tailed). \*\*  $p < .01$  (one-tailed)

<sup>a</sup> CSE<sub>pr</sub> refers to the *private collective self-esteem subscale* of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luthanen and Crocker 1992). Cell entries in this column are the zero-order correlations for the overall sample between CSE<sub>pr</sub> and each variable. Cell entries in other columns refer to ANCOVA-adjusted mean scores (and standard deviations) for each condition

information about possible racist conspiracies in the remaining scale items. In the course of responding to these items, participants in all conditions likely drew upon a broader base of cultural knowledge, beyond the fleeting manipulation, that tends to obscure perception of present racism and promotes collective forgetting of past racism. (see Kurtis et al. 2010).

Another speculative explanation for the concentration of the effect is the close resemblance between items in the criminalization component and examples that constituted the race-relevant history manipulation (e.g., the FBI's illegal intimidation of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other African Americans).<sup>1</sup> This explanation implies that awareness about particular, past conspiracies does not necessarily transfer to belief in the plausibility of all present conspiracies, but instead is most efficacious in changing beliefs about the plausibility of similar new conspiracies. One can speculate that, without extended periods of exposure to "alternative" constructions of history that afford recognition of racism, cultural knowledge and identity concerns will likely lead to denial of racist conspiracies unless one confronts white Americans with

well-documented, undeniable evidence about nearly identical cases of past racism.

Although concentration of the effect of the manipulation in the criminalization component suggests a less general effect on perception of conspiracy plausibility, it does provide evidence against a competing, demand explanation. According to the demand explanation, participants who read the article about historically documented racism may have inferred that the researchers were interested in its effects on racism perception and then indicated greater plausibility of new racist conspiracies in order to be good participants. However, if participants were merely responding to experimental demand, then one might expect a general effect of the manipulation on all items of the conspiracy plausibility scale. Instead, we observed an effect of the manipulation only for the criminalization component of the conspiracy plausibility scale. Although this pattern suggests that the manipulation of historical knowledge provided participants with different bases of information from which to judge the plausibility of new, race-based conspiracies, conclusive evidence against a demand explanation awaits future research.

## General Discussion

The present research considered judgments about the plausibility of racist conspiracies as a function of knowledge about historically documented racism. Results of Experiment 1 revealed that recognition of past anti-black conspiracies was greater among African American participants than European American participants, and this greater recognition was associated with increased ratings of informant credibility and plausibility regarding a contemporary anti-black conspiracy. Results of Experiment 2 provide evidence that exposure to information about past

<sup>1</sup> Examination of results for individual items indicated that the effect of the manipulation on the criminalization component was particularly strong for the first item on the conspiracy belief scale, "The government deliberately singles out and investigates Black elected officials to discredit them in a way it does not do with White officials." The ANCOVA for this item indicated that CSE<sub>pr</sub> was a marginally significant covariate,  $F(1, 101) = 3.14$ ,  $p = .08$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ , and both the omnibus effect  $F(2, 101) = 8.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .15$ , and planned contrast  $t(101) = 3.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .37$ , were highly significant. Participants in the race-relevant condition expressed greater agreement with this item ( $M_{\text{adj}} = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) than did participants in the other two conditions, ( $M_{\text{adj}} = 2.58$  and  $2.97$ ,  $SDs = 1.36$  and  $1.42$ , in the race-silent and control conditions, respectively).

anti-black conspiracies can be sufficient to lead European Americans to express less extreme disagreement about the plausibility of present anti-black conspiracies.

Although results provide evidence for hypotheses, the experiments are not without limitations. First, results suffer from low statistical power that may have produced failures to identify statistically significant differences. Second, the measure of historical knowledge in Experiment 1 does not perfectly distinguish between knowledge of documented events and the tendency to claim racism in past events regardless of documentation. Third, the design for Experiment 2 does not completely rule out a demand explanation for observed effects of the historical knowledge manipulation. Despite the limitations of each individual experiment, the overall body of work points in consistent fashion to the role of historical knowledge in perception of racist conspiracies.

The theoretical and practical significance of the present work lies in its implications for understanding group differences in perceptions of racism. Recent events have produced several important examples of group differences in perception of racism (e.g., perceptions that the government delay in responding to Hurricane Katrina was partly a function of racism; Page and Puente 2005). How is one to understand these differences in perception? Prevailing accounts in everyday discourse have tended to locate group differences in an African American tendency to “play the race card”: that is, to exaggerate racism for politically motivated ends. Against this background, the present work emphasizes two important shifts in understanding group differences in perception of racism.

#### From Motivational Forces to Informational Sources

The first shift involves a movement to informational sources of group differences in perception of racism. Without denying that identity motivations impact racism perception, we argue that even if people from different groups judged the plausibility of racist conspiracies in a disinterested fashion, their judgments would still diverge because they are based on different information concerning the prevalence of racism in US society (see Branscombe et al. 1999). Among other sources of information, European American judgments rest largely upon mainstream representations of history that tend to downplay the role of racism in US society. African Americans have additional sources of knowledge about the past (e.g., family history, black entertainment media, and Afrocentric educational resources; Asante 1998; Sigelman and Welch 1991) that imply a larger role for racism in the present.

Although we have distinguished between motivational and informational sources of differences in perception of racism, it is important not to overstate the distinction.

Indeed, future research should assess the extent to which group information differences might be motivated. Just as people are motivated to reconstruct their individual pasts in ways that promote a positive personal identity (Wilson and Ross 2003), they are also motivated to reconstruct the collective past in ways that promote a positive social identity (see Baumeister and Hastings 1997; Branscombe 2004; Wertsch 2002). Thus, European Americans may be motivated to avoid historical information—like evidence of racism in US history—that might induce collective guilt or otherwise threaten social identity. Moreover, even when individuals succeed in judging events or seeking historical information in a dispassionate, unmotivated fashion, their judgments may still bear the traces of ideological motivations embedded in the representations of history upon which they draw (Kurtis et al. 2010). Because mainstream representations of American history often understate the extent of past racist injustice, otherwise “objective” observers who draw primarily upon these mainstream representations may inadvertently understate the plausibility of racist conspiracies.

#### From African American Patterns to European American Patterns

The second shift concerns the question of which reactions to allegations about racist conspiracies require explanation. Mainstream media and scientific discussions often focus on African American perceptions of conspiracy plausibility as the anomalous phenomenon that requires explanation. Implicit in this focus is a construction of beliefs about conspiracy plausibility as deviant or abnormal. This construction is evident in the phrase, *conspiracy theory*, which carries the connotation of “unfounded, outlandish, or irrational” and “is used to refer to allegations of collusion that the speaker considers unproven, unlikely, or false” (Wikipedia 2004).

The present research suggests that rather than distortion or *lack* of contact with reality, perceptions of conspiracy plausibility are related to *greater* contact with reality, in the form of knowledge about historically documented, racist conspiracies. From this perspective, the perception that alleged racist conspiracies “might possibly be true”—the label for the midpoint of the conspiracy beliefs measure, corresponding to the mean plausibility rating of African American participants in previous research (Crocker et al. 1999)—reflects neither ignorance nor strategic exaggeration, but instead sober recognition in light of America’s racist past that such outlandish things are possible (Klonoff and Landrine 1999). This is not to say that perceptions of conspiracy plausibility are without negative consequences. For example, perceptions of conspiracy plausibility can predispose people to distrust some trustworthy authorities,

discredit useful information, and engage in risky or unhealthy behaviours (Bird and Bogart 2005). However, the present research suggests that one should understand these perceptions as reasonable suspicion based on awareness of past oppression rather than manifestations of pathology (see also Terrell and Terrell 1981; Whaley 1998).

In contrast to the prevailing focus on “African American” tendencies to perceive anti-black conspiracies as plausible, the present research shifts attention to “European American” tendencies to perceive anti-black conspiracies as implausible. Rather than a more accurate reading of events, this pattern was associated with less recognition of historically documented, racist conspiracies. From this perspective, the perception that alleged racist conspiracies are “almost certainly not true”—the label for the endpoint of the original measure of conspiracy belief used in previous research (Crocker et al. 1999), corresponding to the mean plausibility rating of European American participants—is not objective truth. Instead, one can argue that this pattern constitutes a more extreme denial of conspiracy plausibility than is warranted in light of historically documented US racism.

Our central point is not to argue that African American perceptions about the plausibility of any particular conspiracy are necessarily more accurate than European American perceptions of impossibility, but instead to argue against interpretations of group differences that privilege European American patterns as an objective standard for truth. One source of this explanatory pattern may be that European American constructions of reality serve as the backdrop against which difference is tested (see Hegarty and Pratto 2001; Miller et al. 1991). The goal of the present research has been to reveal the bias inherent in prevailing accounts, propose an alternative account as a correction to this bias, and thereby counteract its unfortunate consequences.

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